According to recent scholarship on clientelism, local “brokers” play a primary role in distributing benefits in exchange for electoral support. Yet, high-level politicians in India receive voluminous direct, unmediated requests from citizens for individual benefits. I develop a theory that explains this puzzling prevalence of “constituency service” in a developing-country context. I then test observable implications using survey experiments administered to a unique nested random sample of politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens. I show that while senior politicians do not condition the supply of assistance on the partisanship of requestors, citizens’ demands are closely linked to local political dynamics: individuals who are “blocked” by non-copartisan brokers are most likely to appeal to a senior politician for benefits. My findings suggest that existing accounts ignore important dynamics of constituency service that co-exist alongside, and provide a representative counterpoint to, clientelist distribution.

Jennifer Bussell is the Gruber Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research seeks to understand the foundations of democratic politics in economically developing states. In particular she is interested in the effects of diverse formal and informal institutional constraints—such as federalism, coalition politics, and corruption—on the behavior of politicians in electorally competitive environments. Dr. Bussell’s regional focus is South Asia, and she has also conducted fieldwork in Africa and Latin America. A summary of Dr. Bussell’s book, Corruption and Reform in India: Public Services in the Digital Age, is available on her Research Page at http://jenniferbussell.com/research

Clients or Constituents? Citizens, Intermediaries, and Distributive Politics in India

a talk by

Jennifer Bussell,
Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at UC Berkeley

Tuesday, September 29, 2015
5 - 7 pm
10 Stephens Hall (ISAS Conf. Room)

Event is free & open to public. Information at 510-642-3608 or southasia.berkeley.edu